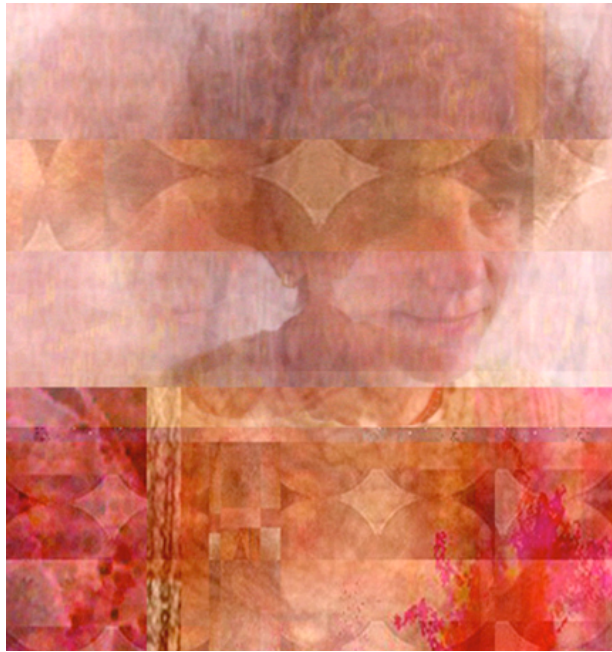


Johanna Drucker
Joseph Nechvatal and Critical Pleasure

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Joseph Nechvatal portrait of Johanna Drucker (2006)

Electronic activity has wrought a transformation on nearly every aspect of current culture so that the very term current resonates with the electronic pulse of active charges flowing across a continually shifting differential. The body of the fine arts has suffered an infusion of new processes and data manipulations so that it now lives the same cyborg hybrid life as every other entity. Rather than reject this situation as an aberration, Joseph Nechvatal makes use of the mutation of visual art by electronic manipulation to reengage the critical pleasure of aesthetics. Though seduced by the potent possibility of new technologies, Nechvatal doesn't merely celebrate technologically driven change or flirt with fashionable trends in image manipulation. On the contrary, Nechvatal is endeavoring to salvage something fundamental for the

visual arts through his approach -- a self-conscious continuation of the transgressive terms on which the avant-garde has historically functioned as a site of strategic intervention in cultural activity. Nechvatal believes that art may still -- in this networked new world disorder of random connections and virtual encounters -- be able to reveal something about the ways in which culture operates in and through images, language, and representations. Art may be able to demonstrate an insight into the delusions of the spectacle, the seamless simulacra, and the soulless self-promoting hype of the virtual, through its capacity to introduce critical thought through complex visual images.

The historical context for Nechvatal's work can be traced to the deconstruction of the stable concept of the image which was central to the premises of 20th century modernism. Modernism's antidote to spiritual and cultural uncertainty was to propose that a universal language of form could transcend individual circumstances and thus serve as a site of stable meaning. In turn, the idea that meaning could attend to anything (visual form, language, or human action) outside of culture and history came under severe attack in the decades now associated with postmodernism in which the realization that images were always part of their moment, laden with specific cultural values, and implicated in networks of power and repression, functioned as a theoretical impetus. An entire generation of artists based their practice on holding a harshly mimetic mirror to the blatant banalities and exploitative grotesqueries of a world transformed by the commodification, commercialization, and co-optation of every aspect of human life into representation. Nechvatal works on a counter demonstration. He is intent upon showing the continued potency of images as a site and instrument of critical pleasure against a visually saturated culture matrix.

Aspects of this saturation serve as an element of Nechvatal's work. He has archived his own image bank, a select group of visual files which serve as his basic pictorial units excised from the massive field of contemporary visual culture. These elements are representational in nature -- fraught with reference, meaning, and the values which attend to images which circulate through systems of meaning production. They are images whose specific character is an index of Nechvatal's own concerns with the mutative effects of sexually transmitted diseases, a comment on the body politic as a vulnerable being whose self-representation has to reflect the processes of transformation which have infiltrated its tissues and networks. Nechvatal's appropriation of these motifs isn't a pat moral judgment on either disease or policies, on the official ignorance of and repression of information about AIDS, or a pronouncement on supposedly self-destructive impulses. It is an attempt to affirm excesses of pleasure and transgression as liberatory, as the means by which an escape valve opens in the cultural code of restrictive discipline. In this regard, Nechvatal clearly embraces the work of Georges Bataille, for whom the principles of ecstasy were the basic tenets of salvation. A spiritual conviction informs this position, such that passion, sexuality, and art are all elements of the sacrament, sacred rituals of sacrilege, pledged to transgression as a holy rite for achieving subversive grace.

In artistic terms Nechvatal is intent upon restoring to images their ornamental and decorative power, on returning to visuality its capacity to fascinate outside of the limits of mere commercial persuasion or banal manipulation. Rather than make use of the critical means by which postmodernists wrenched appropriated images from their cultural site with the least amount of transformation, Nechvatal insists that the tensions between image as cultural value and image as visual pleasure be exploited. The relentlessness of reference which disciplines visual play by locking images into systems of meaning is the code which Nechvatal identifies as the limit which must be transgressed. And

yet the modernist non-representational form of supposedly pure visuality, with its denial of cultural inflection, also comes under attack in Nechvatal's work. In place of either of these positions -- that of referential or transcendent meaning -- he puts forth an aesthetics whose ethic is grounded in decorative excess, in an ornate embroidered tapestry of images whose referential value flickers through the complex texture, degenerated and alive, redolent and resonant, but unable to be fixed with definite certainty into any stable system. This use of the decorative in all its excessiveness functions as a means of destabilizing the networks of meaning supposedly held in place by and governing the terms of the social through the symbolic systems of language and visual representation. Critical pleasure, as Nechvatal defines it, is this act of destabilization through visual seduction and engagement. Through this act the rule-bound and instrumental functions of symbolic systems are subverted, challenged, and undermined. The very terms on which their operative functionality is insured can't be maintained against the eroding forces of a pleasure which does not rely on certainty or fixity, but on mutation, transformation, and change -- on that continual play of a charge transferred across a differential.

To achieve this condition, Nechvatal translates image into information, treats it as input and output, as data. The sources and final form of his works are visual: image files, scanned and reassembled materials which move into the condition of stored data in order to be manipulated and then ultimately output through a robotic painting machine. But between these two relatively stable endpoints the image is suspended, subject to processing as information. Nechvatal's process is thus infused with technological activity, a virtual domain of cybernetic process. Because the image can exist in its suspended condition as information, as a file of data, it can be acted upon through electronic means. By writing a program, Nechvatal introduces viruses into his files, bits of active program which act upon the file in a limited but transformative

mutation. The body of the image is literally eroded in the process, but behind the screen, unseen, in the inner workings of its stored condition as a file. When the virus has run its course through the file the body of the image offers its wrecked corpus for our inspection. The resulting beauty is not meant as a denial of the reality of damage, but as an antidote to its terminal velocity through the culture at large.

As image becomes information and information suffers a metaphoric illness the symbolic -- a system of relatively stable meaning production -- serves as a site within which disease is inscribed as a motif, an image. There may be a lurking phantom in this activity, a decadently gratuitous appropriation of the superficial signs of a culture under attack, ill-equipped to combat the profound disorder of its own physical life, its spiritual deficits mounting through denial and repression. But there is also a serious investigation of the very way in which an identity or entity maintains its borders, its distinguishing characteristics within a network of interlocking conditions and relations. If the condition of being -- an image, a person, a thing -- is a merely a matter of a temporary configuration or expression of a continually changing file, then coming to terms with instability erodes not only the premise of ontological certainty, but also, of semiotic function. The mutating image file performs a disintegration of the symbolic system from within -- the elements which form terms are being changed, are unable to assume a permanent and fixed form, and thus unable to function in the establishment of a stable system within which meaning or identity could be determined.

The code in the file which comprised the image of a Nechvatal work is transformed radically through manipulations which rearrange the very site of their identifying difference, the substrate which permits a traced mark of difference to be maintained. The file functions as a receptive but resistant body

of matter/material/materiality in the sense that it sustains writing in its residual traces. It vibrates with a continual reawakening to the nuances of its own systemic ordering. Order suffuses into fact, a defacto arrangement, made, intended, accidental, into a definitive though mutable form. Form means arrangement, temporary, constrained, configured, but not fixed. A momentary equilibrium is all that marks the boundaries of an organism sufficiently for it to be distinguished from the rest of the chaotic ether. In the neural map of the electronic mind the will to form is merely a by-product of the capacity to repeat a sequence. Meaning merely the production of a differential analysis from one site to the next, a continual displacement. When the sites themselves suffer continual mutation, the process allows for no illusion of permanence at all.

From the public stock of images, then, Nechvatal transforms a select group into a matrix of meta-information. Composed images are stored as files whose vulnerable condition of being only echoes the impermanence of all identity, but which can be called upon to demonstrate a new intervention in the old myths of stable order and meaning production. The mutated files suffer their changes and then appear, ravaged testimonials, decorative, replete, seductively ornate with a fin de millennial density fraught with referential angst and poetic lyricism. Finally, through the means of a robotic arm, a painting machine, a point by point surface is saturated with pigment, reconciling the classical process of placing paint on a stable surface with a new cybernetic processing in a synthesis undreamt of in our old philosophy. Nechvatal's elaborate palimpsestic tapestry works offer an affirmative reply to the negative images of late civilization's exhaustion and ennui. Here is a network of visual pleasure whose critical insight resonates with a satisfying complexity, providing a surface whose body indexes the corpus of the social, proposing mutation as a process of reinvention and renewal.